

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
STATE OF MONTANA

BRIAN SCHWEITZER  
GOVERNOR



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April 23, 2007

The Honorable Maurice Hinchey  
U. S. House of Representatives  
2431 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Hinchey,

I appreciated very much the opportunity to address your committee regarding the status of Yellowstone Park's free-roaming wild bison and the threat these animals pose to Montana's brucellosis-free status. The aim of maintaining a "free-roaming herd" that does not at the same time threaten the state's brucellosis-free status has presented a constant conflict in the area. Hungry bison leave the Park in winter in search of forage, cattle occupy nearby grounds shortly thereafter, federal agencies pursue conflicting policies, and the state is caught in between.

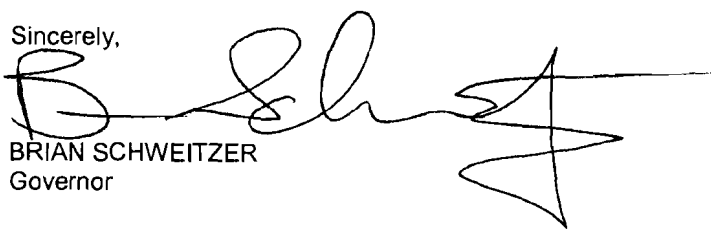
Historically, attempts at management have ranged from firing line hunts to litigation between state and federal agencies. As you know, the five federal and state agencies involved are currently operating under a three-step Interagency Bison Management Plan, agreed to in 2000, which calls for bison hazing, capture, testing and slaughter. It allows a very limited number of bison outside the Park's boundaries in winter months, only in well-defined zones, and still today the plan remains stuck on step one.

Brucellosis is present in both bison and elk populations in the area, and in accordance with AHPIS rules, evidence of brucellosis infection in two cattle herds in any area of the state causes our entire state to lose its disease-free status. Clearly, the mere existence of and practices dictated by this document do not prevent status loss, and I am committed to finding innovative ways to further protect our state's cattle industry as well as enhance the continued viability of the Park's iconic bison.

Following recommendations of the state veterinarians across the nation to keep cattle separated from disease carrying wildlife, I have initiated discussions with area ranchers about acceptable ways to increase spatial separation between bison and livestock, and to provide appropriate compensation to ranchers. We are now nearing agreement with the largest operator in the region, the Royal Teton Ranch, in which they will agree to remove cattle and allow bison usage and passage for a cash settlement. We very much need federal help with completion of this agreement, which may well prove precedent-setting and point to sustainable solutions. Loss of disease-free status by the entire State of Montana due to possible infection in this localized area makes little sense. USDA has thus far refused to discuss any sort of "regionalization" concept, but this issue too must be addressed.

I look forward to working with you to bring the two goals of a sustained herd and secured state disease status to realization, and I extend a standing invitation to you and the entire committee to visit Montana and the Park regions in question.

Sincerely,

  
BRIAN SCHWEITZER  
Governor